



## COVER SHEET

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## D. Bruno Starrs

### Soft Sleeper. Copyright 2007.

David Meredith regarded the train to Shanghai with a cocked eyebrow intended to impart an air of world weary sophistication. Steam rose in staccato bursts from the blue gun-metal hide of the shuddering machine as it snorted and belched to life, scaring a chubby-legged, wide-eyed child into the arms of a comforting, wide-faced mother. Another toddler in a backside-less jump suit was supported by her mother as the child dumped a steaming load right in the middle of the platform. Nobody seemed to take any notice. A few minutes later a businessman in a dark overcoat and Fedora hat stepped in the hot mess and instantly realised his mistake. Meredith couldn't hold back and laughed out loud as the browning slush on the concrete merged with other shoeprints. Suddenly, the wind began displaying its uncaring strength, bending all things human in its path, whistling around the paint-flaked square poles of the platform and gusting into drawn-taut faces. The Australian had been impatiently waiting as delays were explained in still unlearnt Mandarin over the P.A. for nearly half an hour. The express train from Beijing to Shanghai was not yet accepting passengers as it sat amid the fluttering snow of a typically freezing winter day. Should he return to the warmth of the crowded waiting room? His clock tower gaze got him nowhere: its hands had been locked on 12.10 since he'd arrived. He looked at the other waiting passengers to gauge the situation, all stamping feet and restless huddled families. Then a whistle drew his eyes back to the train and he finally heard the announcement that he guessed equated to 'All aboard!'

Beijing had been Meredith's home for the past year while he taught English to sophomores at the Chinese Agricultural University and now, as he took off his padded overcoat in the sweltering confines of his – as yet – unshared two-sleeper compartment, his three most dedicated students had found him and were bidding him farewell. His next academic year would be spent teaching at a private university in the great southern Chinese city of Shanghai. The former students of his were all smoking American cigarettes, savouring their last few minutes with their status-elevating foreigner *laoshi* along with the blue Virginia fumes. They were praising the luxury of his soft sleeper berth (not any ordinary soft sleeper, but a deluxe *gāoji ruǎn wò*) and were making him promise to send cards regularly. At long last the Porter saved him by leaning into the compartment and ordering the guests out, and so former teacher and students shook hands for the last time mere seconds before the train lurched away.

It was so hot in the compartment that Meredith took off his jacket and gently laid it on the bunk on the left, thus claiming that bed as his own. Minutes later, as the sweat trickled down his lower back, he also took off his shirt and folded it over the bed-rail. He sat on the small steel stool fixed next to the wood-inlaid writing desk in his moist cotton singlet and took out a stick of gum, which he chewed slowly in time with the rhythm of the train. The sweat trickled further and he considered taking his pants off too - he was alone, after all - but he decided against it. He tried again to make sense of the Chinese sign beneath what looked like a thermostat but soon gave up. There was a small electric fan on the desk and he swivelled it towards him but its feeble breeze provided little comfort. He sighed, unpacked his expensive lap-top computer and began idly downloading and editing some photos from his digital

camera. Suddenly he became aware of a Chinese accented female voice emanating loudly from the corridor and his curiosity was piqued. Whoever it was complained stridently in English “Don’t you have even one empty berth, Porter?”

A male voice replied in Chinese but Meredith gathered the Porter’s answer was not what she wished to hear as she responded in a near shout.

“That is so insulting! You can work out something for a man but not a woman? How antiquated and sexist you are!”

At this, Meredith could hold back no longer: he had to see she who was the owner of that voice and that attitude. He opened the door and extended his head into the corridor. The woman immediately saw him and blushed. She was a slim but athletically built Chinese woman with a fashionably gelled hairstyle and immaculate make-up. Her clothing consisted of a pale grey flared pants suit with a crimson scarf around her slender neck and she looked very stylish. Meredith was quite impressed.

“The dining room it is then. OK. But if a vacancy does arise please let me to know immediately.” She followed this with a few harsh words of Mandarin before turning on her heels, and marching down the corridor lugging her heavy suitcase, the weight of it almost bending her horizontal. Just as she was about to exit into the dining carriage she stopped, straightened and looked back at Meredith. As their eyes met she blushed and demurely lowered her gaze.

‘So very Chinese’, Meredith thought to himself, engrossed. Her eyes had instantly burned into his psyche. This Chinese girl had, in this minor altercation with a railway minor official and her fleeting glance in his direction, suddenly captivated him. There was now only one objective in his existence; to find out more about this girl. He was ablaze now. Burning with an almost forgotten passion, he sat alone in his compartment as the train slowed for the station at Feng Tai. The room was less stultifying as fresh air blew in the open slot of the window, but Meredith hardly noticed. Instead, he wondered how he could discover more about the mystery woman who spoke English better even than his best university students.

The Shanghai express shuddered to a halt and Meredith quickly buttoned up his shirt, pulled on his jacket and climbed off the train. As the cold air on the platform hit him he caught the surprising sight of a familiar face. It was his friend James Newman, an American born Chinese teacher of English from another Beijing university. He looked again to be certain, but Meredith was confident it was him.

“James! James, mate!” Meredith waved to the man sitting on a bench just out of reach of the driving sleet and the balding, tweed-coated man looked up with surprise from the fish and sautéed vegetables he was carefully eating from a white Styrofoam take-away food container.

“David Meredith! *Ni hou!* My God, are you on this train too?” yelled the effusive American. Several Chinese on their way to board the train raised eyebrows at the man of Chinese appearance shouting in English so loudly and enthusiastically.

Unswayed by the glances, Newman stood, wiped himself clean with a paper serviette and vigorously shook hands with the Australian.

“Yes, mate. I got a job offer too good to turn down. It’s at a private university in Shanghai and as I’ve got heaps of time on my hands ‘til next semester, I decided to do it by ...” and Meredith then half-lowered his eyelids in a comic attempt at looking sensual, “... *romantic* train travel rather than *efficient* air.” The two middle-aged men laughed loudly and after a pause Meredith continued, “So, Shanghai, too, huh?”

“Yes, indeed. You remember my fiancée, Xiyun, whom you met just after you arrived in China? Well, she had to fly to Shanghai three days ago when her father had a stroke. You know how the Chinese are so dedicated to their parents. And I’ve just finished a weekend English camp here in Feng Tai. Anyway, we’ve set a February

date for the wedding and to save a few *kwai*, I'll be riding on a hard seat. But I'll bet you're in a first class soft sleeper, right?"

"Actually, a deluxe soft sleeper, with its own bathroom. The new university is paying all my expenses. So how are you and Xiyun? I haven't seen you for a month."

"Try two months! We're both fine but working our butts off. Trying to get enough dough together to start our own school after the wedding, but keep that one to yourself, buddy! Say, you must try this fish stew. It's the speciality of Feng Tai and it's absolutely exquisite! I've got plenty and it's piping hot; straight out of the pot!"

Newman pointed to a food stall doing good business in a sheltered corner of the platform. Meredith smiled, grabbed his friend's suitcase and headed for the train.

"OK, Newman, when it comes to Chinese cuisine I know you're the expert but let's get ourselves on board in the dining room first where it's warm and dry."

"No argument there, my friend!"

\* \* \*

The two men climbed aboard the dining car where Newman had his ticket checked and they both ordered coffee before sitting opposite each other in the brown vinyl-upholstered booth.

As they sat, Meredith immediately noticed the outspoken woman he had observed before seated alone just two booths down. She appeared to be deeply immersed in a novel, the title of which Meredith could not make out. After a few minutes more of catching up with Newman, during which he was constantly trying hard not to stare at the girl two tables away as he sipped his coffee and nibbled on his friend's fish dish, Meredith decided to tell Newman about the incident.

"Not long after the train pulled out from Beijing I saw something quite remarkable outside my compartment. Or I should say, some *one* quite remarkable."

Newman arched his eyebrows. "Oh, really. Tell me more."

"There was this beautiful young Chinese woman arguing with the porter because he couldn't put her in a compartment with a male passenger. Seems she really wanted a soft sleeper but the porter wasn't going to waver from the regulations. She was making it quite clear she was not happy; in Mandarin and ... in perfect English. She actually used the words 'sexist' and 'antiquated'! In the same sentence! And she's now seated just two tables away. No, no, don't look. Oh, it doesn't matter; she's totally absorbed in her book."

But just as Newman turned with what anybody watching would interpret as an expression of unbridled curiosity, the woman looked up at the two westerners and smiled knowingly. Meredith momentarily cringed with embarrassment but decided to make the most of the situation. He cockily saluted the girl with two outstretched fingers to his forehead fully expecting her to cover her mouth and giggle like a schoolgirl. Instead, the woman simply lifted her book to cover her face entirely, seemingly unimpressed. Disappointed, Meredith looked at his companion hoping he had missed the girl's snub. But Newman's smirk told him he had seen all.

"You do realise you've got no chance at all with her, don't you?"

Newman realised his comment had stung, and tried to explain himself.

"It's not that she's out of your league, buddy. But you've got to be introduced. By a friend of the family or a work colleague. Especially if you're a foreigner. Even me. I mean, I look Chinese, but if I hadn't been working alongside Xiyun when we met then nothing ever would've happened. It's the Chinese way."

"But you saw the smile she just gave me! Well, gave *us*."

"Hey, prove me wrong," Newman chortled, "Whatcha got to lose?"

Newman, still sniggering, reached into his jacket and retrieved a packet of Marlboro menthol cigarettes. He tore off the cellophane top and proffered one to his Australian friend who dismissively waved them away.

“Hey, have you quit, pal? Well, good for you!”

Newman lit up and exhaled a thick blue plume high into the air. The girl behind him looked up again as the distinctive menthol aroma wafted over and she instantly beckoned the dining car attendant over.

“Excuse me, waiter. Do you have Marlboro menthol cigarettes?” She spoke in Mandarin except for the words ‘Marlboro menthol cigarettes’.

The Porter answered in Mandarin. Something, Meredith guessed, along the lines of: ‘No, Miss. We don’t stock imported goods on the train.’

“But aren’t those *Laowai* smoking Marlboro menthols over there?” She had spoken again in Mandarin but gestured to the foreigners. Meredith, who had been watching her every move out of the corner of his eye, strained to hear her but only made out her use of the term ‘*Laowai*’.

The waiter apparently responded with a repeat of his statement about imported goods but added an unmistakable tone of derision. The girl was instantly inflamed and she deliberately rose her voice as she spoke in English.

“You people on this train are so backward. So scared to try anything new! Oh, just go! Just go!”

The waiter smiled with embarrassment at the woman’s anger and embarrassment at his inability to understand her English. He backed down the aisle toward the dining room counter, smiling as he went, until Meredith stopped him with a hand on his arm.

“Excuse me, waiter, did that young woman ask for menthol Marlboros?”

A barely noticeable sigh escaped from the exasperated waiter’s lips.

“*Wo bu mingbai!*” he said, and continued, smiling as ever, towards the sanctuary of the dining room galley.

Meredith decided to seize the opportunity. He grabbed his friend’s cigarettes, got quickly to his feet and strode the few paces to the woman’s booth.

“Excuse me, Miss. Would you care for a menthol cigarette?”

The woman looked up from her book and blushed, just as she had when he had first seen her in the corridor outside his compartment. “Oh, no, I couldn’t ...”

“Please, help yourself. Take a few, they’re not even mine!” said Meredith, laughing as he extended the cigarettes.

“OK, thanks. Although I really should be cutting back!”

The woman put down her book and smiled back. Eying the paperback novel, Meredith recognised his chance.

“Oh, ‘The Quiet American’. What a great book! Have you read ‘A Burnt Out Case’?”

“No, is it good?”

“It’s my favourite Graham Greene! Um, forgive me for being so forward, but please permit me to introduce myself. I’m David. David Meredith.”

The young Chinese woman slipped off her right-hand black glove slowly and held out her hand to shake. Meredith was mesmerised by the perfection of her fingers, her nails, her knuckles, her palm. He hesitated to touch it with his own clumsy, calloused ham of a hand until her voice shook him out of his trance.

“It’s nice to meet you, David. But how did you know my name?”

Confused, Meredith found himself shaking hands with her and marvelling at the firmness of her grip. Most Chinese women, and many Chinese men, shake hands with all the strength of an ill child. Still, the strangeness of her question worried him.

“I’m sorry, Miss, but I have no idea what your name is.”

The woman's pencilled brows furrowed as she, too, became confused.

"But you just called me by my English name. You called me 'Meredith'"

The Australian threw his head back and roared with laughter as he realised the error.

"My name is Meredith. It's my family name. I know it's a girl's name and I can tell you I've often thought of changing it by deed poll!"

"Deed poll? What is a deed poll?"

"Oh, it's just a piece of paper that let's you change the name in your driver's licence, passport and everything else. But by the time I was legally old enough to change my name, being teased by the other kids was no longer an issue."

"I am getting a free English lesson! Well, I am your grateful student."

Slowly, as she always moved when she knew she was being watched by a man, Meredith - the Chinese woman - carefully took a fashionable silver lighter from her elegant black leather handbag and lit one of the cigarettes Meredith - the Australian man - had given her. To him, the whole process seemed to take about five minutes. She blew a plume of smoke out of the side of her lip-sticked mouth and away from the *Laowai* man, who was still standing awkwardly next to her cubicle. All the time she avoided looking at him, well aware of his studious gaze. She was still avoiding his scrutiny when she spoke, only looking at him from under her mascara-ed eyelashes when she finished the sentence.

"You'd best be calling me by my Chinese name, Zhang Lian-yun."

"Well, Lian-yun, I'm happy to make your acquaintance. May I join you?"

Lian-yun gestured to the bench seat opposite her.

"Please do, Mr. Meredith. I need to practice my English."

Meredith smiled inwardly. The first hurdle had been overcome.

\* \* \*

"Why don't you ask your friend over as well?" Lian-yun indicated to Newman now smoking by himself. Although the American was safely betrothed, Meredith was not keen on sharing this encounter. Nevertheless, he knew enough of Chinese etiquette to realise that in doing so he would prevent disapproving stares. The presence of the Chinese-looking Newman, acting as an apparent chaperone, would prevent anyone from assuming she was a ... well, a prostitute. Meredith called to Newman to join them. As the porter re-appeared Lian-yun immediately accosted him.

"Porter, what time will we get into Tientsin?"

The poor fool gave her a blank stare and Lian-yun asked again in Mandarin. Apparently, he then said "Six o'clock. Are you getting off at Tientsin?"

Meredith knew very little Mandarin, but he knew the time he knocked off from work. Lian-yun continued to talk to the porter in English.

"Well, naturally! Do you expect me to sit here in the dining carriage for 14 or 15 hours until we get to Shanghai? I'm going to have to get off at Tientsin and hope I can get a soft sleeper on the next train!"

The porter didn't seem to understand or care but after Lian-yun repeated her question in Chinese he apparently recommended a hotel in Tientsin, to which suggestion Lian-yun sniffed in derision. As she did, she took her purse from her handbag at her side and proffered the porter a red 100 Renmimbi note.

"I'd like to pick up the bill for these two gentlemen."

Of course, by this stage Newman had not even been properly introduced, and his instant reaction was to stand and refuse the woman's generosity. Lian-yun was insistent, however, reminding the two men of their generosity with the cigarettes.

Meredith thought for a moment about the revelations of the last few minutes. There was a perfectly good reason now to invite Lian-yun to join him for dinner; a

repayment for her covering the coffees. But she had just indicated to the porter that she would be getting off the train at six which was far too early for anything but the most rushed of dinner dates. What was he to do?

“You have business in Shanghai, Miss Lian-yun?”

“Yes. And it will be quite inconvenient if I miss it by staying overnight in Tientsin waiting for the next soft sleeper.”

“Please don’t consider me forward, but I think I can help you with your situation. You see, I have a deluxe class soft sleeper compartment all to myself. We could take turns getting some rest in there without anyone thinking or knowing about it. While you sleep, I’ll read here in the Dining room, and then vice versa.”

“That’s really too kind, Mr. Meredith, but the Porter would be bound to find out, and then what would happen? I’m afraid I couldn’t.”

“If he does I’ll just slip him some cash to keep him quiet.”

“Well, it is a long trip to Shanghai. I will need to catch a few hours sleep at some stage. But I cannot repay you for the gesture. My salary is quite modest.”

“Forget it. I’ll busy myself with your Graham Greene book. It’s been ages since I’ve read any quality English novels. So, what do you do, Miss Lian-yun?”

“I’m a cadet journalist with a magazine in Shanghai. They sent me to Beijing to report on a new nightclub. You might have heard of it: ‘Citrus’? It’s very trendy.”

“I don’t get out much, so, no - I’m not familiar with it. I guess it’s not just another karaoke bar if they sent you all the way from Shanghai to cover it.”

“Well, in itself, it’s not so special, but it’s popular with some celebrities.”

Lian-yun then rattled off a list of Chinese TV stars and singers, only two of whom sounded vaguely familiar to Meredith. Nevertheless, he acted impressed.

“Get any exclusive confessions for your magazine?”

“Naturally, but if I told you then they’d no longer be exclusive!”

“Then pray tell me your own exclusive: how you’re so fluent in English?”

“Why, that is such a simple story it wouldn’t even rate a full paragraph.”

“Nonetheless, I would like to hear it. You see, I am a lecturer of English and none of my Chinese university majors speak half as well as you.”

“And that is because none of them had parents who went to school in London. Although I have never left China, my parents speak only English at home.”

\* \* \*

The evening continued along most pleasantly for Meredith, as the three ate a light dinner. A little past ten, just after the train had pulled away from the industrial city of Shijiazhuang, where the industrial city’s pollution ensured all windows were temporarily shut, he noticed his new young friend yawning. Newman had been quiet most of the evening and had just retired to his uncomfortable hard seat where he would employ his enviable skill at falling asleep anywhere under any conditions.

“Lian-yun, perhaps it is time for you to take me up on my offer. How does five hours sound to you? I’ll come in at four or five a.m. and then you can make use of the private bathroom at your leisure. I’ll put my eye mask on so I won’t see a thing: your modesty will be intact. You can wake me just before we get to Shanghai later in the morning. That way we’ll both arrive relatively refreshed.”

Lian-yun simply smiled and nodded.

Meredith carried the girl’s luggage to his cabin, which was still unoccupied by any other passenger, and stowed her luggage on the rack over the bunk.

“I’ll lock the door. But remember, if by chance, some other man does come aboard and the Porter lets him take the other berth here, just keep the curtain across your bunk drawn and nobody will be the wiser.”

“Mr. Meredith, you are too kind.”

“Please, I told you to call me David. You know, I hope maybe we can catch up again in Shanghai and you can show me the sights.”

Lian-yun said nothing and lowered her eyes, but the blush that warmed her cheeks said enough. After a few seconds, she raised her gaze.

“Thank you, David. I think you can teach me a lot.”

And with that, Meredith locked her in and went back to the dining car where he read ‘The Quiet American’ for five hours until he returned to his soft sleeper. He gently shook Lian-yun awake and she immediately grabbed her clothes and locked herself in the bathroom. Exhausted, the Australian changed into pyjamas and swallowed a sleeping pill with a swig from his bottled water, as was his routine. He inserted earplugs, slipped on an eyemask and crawled between the sheets in the berth opposite the bunk Lian-yun had been asleep in only minutes before.

\* \* \*

Meredith woke slowly as he remembered through crusty eyelids that he was on an express train to Shanghai. He realised it had stopped and he was very likely now at his destination. He prised out his earplugs and lifted off his eye mask, groaning as he eased his stiff, aching body from the bed and swung his legs over the edge. A splash of cold water to the face from the washbasin and he started to feel a little more alive and the prospect of a piping hot coffee saw him go to his briefcase for his wallet. Suddenly, he was very much awake and scrambling through his bags. Frantic, he lifted the mattress of the bunk: had he decided to hide it after he took his sleeping pill? But there was now no mistaking it. His wallet was gone. His face turned white as he realised his laptop computer and camera were also gone.

Meredith leapt from the train unperturbed by the fact he was still wearing his pyjamas. He ran a few steps down the platform before turning and running the opposite direction. Unfamiliar with the Shanghai station he began shouting wildly.

“Help! Help me! I’ve been robbed! She’s robbed me! Police! Police!”

Seeing a woman in grey strolling the other way he sprinted up to her and swung her around violently but it wasn’t Lian-yun. He stammered out an apology in Mandarin to the startled stranger before noticing another young Chinese woman speaking in English to an older male foreigner.

“Watch out, mate! Don’t trust ‘em! They’re only out to steal from you!”

Meredith was now red in the face, screaming and spluttering.

“She’ll just rip you off! All they want is your money! They say they want to practice their English but it’s a con! She just wants your money!”

A small circle of Chinese people had formed around the raving foreigner. Specks of foam flew from his fast-moving lips. No-one offered assistance. James Newman got off the train two carriages further along and stopped, recognising his friend. He hesitated briefly before walking briskly in the opposite direction.

Meredith had not even seen Newman. Nor did he see Lian-yun - now dressed in a plain blue skirt, blazer and beret - disembark with a Porter wheeling her luggage behind her as she quickly exited the station.

A few of the younger Chinese people in the crowd started laughing at the crazy *Laowai* dressed in nothing but pyjamas and screaming unintelligible English at the top of his lungs. One sneering young man in a sharp navy blue suit tossed a few coins towards him. Suddenly, as Meredith fell to his knees, he noticed the absence of snow on the platform of the Shanghai railway terminal.

**The End.**